

On patrol through the streets of Baghdad

Soldiers of the 501st Military Intelligence Battalion keep the peace, gather information

By David Ruderman and Karl Weisel
104th Area Support Group Public Affairs Office

Day by day, night after night, they patrol the streets of Baghdad to gather information, make better contacts among the local citizenry and to help quell the crime and violence that still pervade the city.

Members of the 501st Military Intelligence Battalion from Wackernheim support the 1st Armored Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team, sharing living and working space with several of the brigades's units at a former palace complex of the Saddam Hussein family.

"We got here on May 17," said Sgt. Jason Woodward of Company B, 501st MI Battalion. "It was a 36-hour trip from Kuwait. That was hell with little or no sleep. It was a feat — the longest, hardest convoy I've ever been on."

"It's (life for soldiers in Baghdad) a lot better than it used to be," said Woodward. "This place was filthy. A lot of the bathrooms weren't working. It's definitely livable now — it's comfortable."

"I'm an Arabic linguist now working as a security technician. We go on the economy everyday. I feel like I'm making a difference," he said, adding that he's putting his language ability to good use.

"Ninety-nine percent of the people I've met are some of the most generous people I've ever met. A lot of the Iraqis we meet haven't made up their minds yet. If they don't have running water they don't understand how the American presence is an improvement. It's hard to tell people who have been oppressed for 45 years to be patient. They really don't know how to act, don't understand freedom and democracy."

"I've had a lot of good experiences since I've been here — granted I don't always feel safe when I roll out of the gate."

"I miss Germany," Woodward added. "My wife's back there and she's pregnant."

"It's a little like what I expected," said Pfc. Corey Blanton, also of Company B, 501st MI Battalion. "I knew it was going to be hot."

"You see a lot of interesting things out there. ... During the daytime it's OK depending on what part of town you go to," said Blanton. "We get shot at about every other night. So far



Photo by Karl Weisel

Like many units in Iraq, patrols are a fact of life for 501st MI Battalion soldiers.

in the daytime I've only heard shots twice.

"I expected to live in a tent, but I never expected to live in a palace," he said. "The last couple of weeks it's gotten 10 times better."

What does he miss about Germany? "I miss my wife and my little daughter who's 20 months old. We've also got one on the way. I spent all day today trying to get on the Internet. The mail's coming in OK — it takes about two weeks to get mail. I miss home the most because I was away for 11 and a half months before. The hardest part of serving in Iraq is missing my family."

"It's a lot like Kosovo — all the kids and stuff," said Spc. Raymond Lowry, Company B, 501st MI. "We provide security for the people. The living conditions here, in one word, are impoverished."

Living conditions for the soldiers "are improving exponentially since we've been here," Lowry said. "Now we've got a weight room and a basketball hoop. We've got our DVD laptops,

we can watch movies and we're about to get satellite."

Lowry, who said he loves his job, misses his wife and two daughters in Germany. "We do what we're told to do. If they shorten it [the deployment], all the better. You plan for the worst and do your best."

"It's as good as can be expected in Baghdad," said Spc. Richard Bailey, also of Company B, 501st. "I didn't expect it to be like in Germany. This is a combat environment. I don't know if this is what you'd call a Third World country, but I do. The culture is a lot

different than I thought it would be. In a lot of Muslim countries the men and women are all covered up and all. It's like that, but then there are lots of people walking around — they look like Americans. I've never seen it with both extremes."

And the patrols are getting less dangerous, he said. "The gunfire has dropped off, I think in part because of our efforts. The people are a little more happy. We're catching some of the terrorists. And it's not just us. Everybody down here's doing great work."

"I'm really proud of them as a first sergeant," said 1st Sgt. Marc Scott, battalion first sergeant. "They're doing a tremendous job. Everyone misses home, but you couldn't ask for a better bunch of kids. ... They've been working every single day sometimes 12 and 18 hours a day. There's really not a lot of complaining — it's just trying to make life better everyday. It's their spirit and their morale that keep this unit functioning. It's a great bunch to be with."

"It worked in Bosnia before, basically transitioning from combat to civil affairs as the fighting tapers off. I'd seen it before so I kind of knew what to look for," said Scott, adding that he was surprised at how many Iraqi children speak English. "I thought that with the Saddam regime it would be suppressed."

"They (the Iraqi people) want this to work. They have patriotic pride, which I can respect," said Scott. "Basically their infrastructure's been destroyed. If your typical American didn't have lights or plumbing since April, he'd be pretty upset."

"It's an experience," said Pfc. Adam Ritterbeck, a 19-year-old soldier from Stowe, Ohio. "It's definitely different than back home — I miss the beer."



Photo by Karl Weisel

Pfc. Joseph Robb, Company A, 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, searches a visitor at the Assassin's Gate.

Keeping watch at the Assassin's Gate

Baumholder soldiers face challenge of sorting friend from foe at high profile checkpoint

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In the streets of Iraq's capital it's never easy to tell friend from foe. But U.S. soldiers on duty in Baghdad have learned that making friends is crucial to transitioning from Saddam Hussein's brutal regime of

repression to a more open society. During patrols and at checkpoints throughout the city soldiers of the 1st Armored Division face the neverending challenge of treating the people with dignity and respect while being on their guard for a shooting or rocket propelled grenade attack.

"It's not what I expected," said



Photo by Karl Weisel

Spc. Johanna Landry and Staff Sgt. Ocie Gay, both of Company A, 2-6th Infantry, keep a sharp eye out for unwanted visitors at the Assassin's Gate checkpoint.

never know who you're going to run into — that's the whole point. It's not like you're in a conventional war. It's really hard to know who your enemy is.

"The kids make you kind of nervous too," he said. "Saddam had these troops of kids trained to be suicide bombers. It makes me sick to see how the people of Iraq were living compared to Saddam and his people."

"For the most part the ones (Iraqi citizens) I've met have been very friendly," said Sgt. Maj. Donald Battle of the 1-35th Armor. "A lot of times they come up and talk to you, saying 'Hi, Mister, how are you?' But you've got to be vigilant."

"Again I'm fortunate to have good soldiers," said Battle. "Morale is high from the private on up. Through some difficult times it's been really good."

"It's a kind of an interesting work place," said Staff Sgt. Jeff Olson, gunner for the 1-35th Armor's S-3. "Our mission's pretty varied. The colonel and the major's tank crew use us to 'plus up' patrols with the company or to go out to checkpoints to relieve the companies. There are six different locations in different sectors of the city. It's kind of nice because you get to see different parts of the city."

"You talk a lot to the kids," Olson said. "They speak English really decently — you'd be surprised. Every once in a while an adult or a teenager will come up to talk to you. Usually they're trying to sell you stuff or beg stuff. They don't like Saddam much. We've had a couple people say if they caught him they would eat him."

Soldiers of Baumholder's 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment,

Photo by Karl Weisel

Vehicles pass through a huge gate, formerly the entrance to a Baath Party complex in Baghdad, now watched over and guarded by Task Force 1-35 soldiers from Baumholder.

maintain security at the "Assassins' Gate," as it is commonly known among soldiers serving in the area. Demonstrations are an almost daily occurrence outside the gate which once barred the public from entering one of the many privileged-only sections of Baghdad.

"Before the U.S. came to Baghdad the average Iraqi was not allowed past this point," said 1st Lt. Jay Marvin of Company A, 2-6th Infantry. "There are an average of three-to-four demonstrations per week. ... Usually we try to take up three representatives to meet with the leaders. We'll take them in and listen to what they have to say."

A park across the main road was heavily fortified with fighting positions when the 3rd Infantry Division took control of the area in April. Now when demonstrators gather before the imposing arched entrance, American soldiers try to shunt them into the park and keep the entranceway, which is used by Iraqi workers and international agency representatives, free.

"It's just a normal day on the job," said Staff Sgt. Ocie Gay. "I'd like to say it's a normal day at the beach. Last night we had around 150 demonstrators, but it was friendly."

"It's something new every day," said Spc. Johanna Landry. "It gets hot wearing all this gear, and when people get mad it makes it even hotter."

"We won't see changes overnight," said Gay, "but soldiers know that. Things are changing slowly. It might take five or 10 years. I just hope I won't be here then."

"Anytime we have crime — people kidnapped or raped — we try to get the police to help the people," said Marvin. "We have the MPs training the police — trying to get them to be more reactive. The crime is like in the States — you have entrepreneurs trying to make some money," said Marvin. "These

guys (soldiers on guard and patrol) have to deal with it every day."

Iraqi groundskeeper Ali Hossein frequently comes through the Assassin's Gate and has made friends with Marvin and other soldiers. "I see the Americans and I say good, good. I love the Americans," said Hossein, showing the scars he bore from the Iran/Iraq War. "We need peace, not war. The Americans gave us freedom and hope. We need the Army to stay forever."

Iraqi interpreter Majeed Jonbil Shamindil, also a regular at the Assassin's Gate, described his feelings about the American presence in Baghdad. "I say it is like angels coming from God. There are so many people who don't want to believe that Saddam is gone. We need time to change that. It's very beautiful that the Americans are here. They are gentlemen — kind inside. They are generous with everyone."

Shamindil described how he formerly worked in the Ministry of Youth and Sports. "My sisters moved to Sweden and they were worried about me during the war. It is still very dangerous here because many in Baghdad own guns."

As with other soldiers, personal concerns color the Baghdad experience for Mogavero. "I've only got 32 days to go and I'm done." Once he leaves the military he said he plans to go to college, live in Germany with his girlfriend in Cologne, learn the language and find his way in the world. "If there was a major fight going on down here it would be different. It's time for someone young buck to step up to the plate."

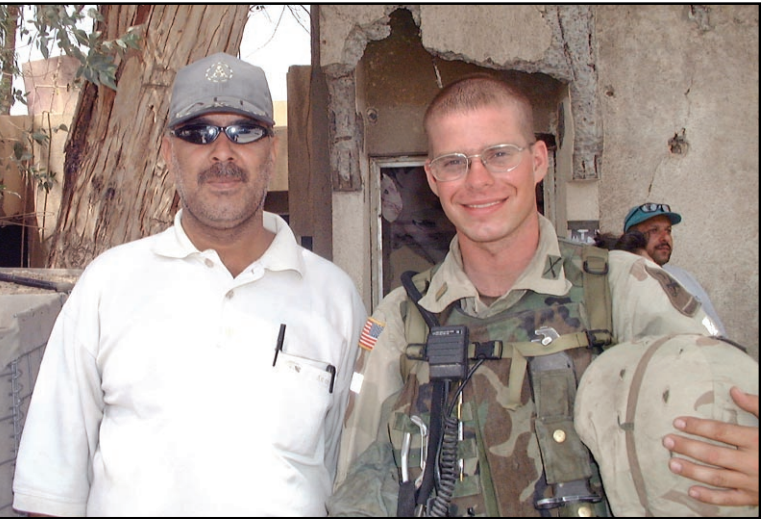


Photo by Karl Weisel

1st Lt. Jay Marvin, 2-6th Infantry, poses for a photo with his Iraqi friend Ali Hossein, a groundskeeper, at the Assassin's Gate checkpoint.